


Taxpayers fork out \$100k for Montgomery worker compensation

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The average Montgomery County employee costs taxpayers about \$100,000 annually between salary and benefits -- an increase of more than 50 percent over the last decade -- according to a study commissioned to diagnose the suburb's seemingly chronic budget shortfalls.

Now the suburb can't afford the generous packages negotiated when the county was flush with money, the report by Montgomery's Office of Legislative Oversight says.

The average general government worker, for example, will bank \$106,600, including benefits, this fiscal year compared with \$67,000 a decade ago.

"There's no way you can't rethink what we're doing and how we're doing it," said Councilman Marc Elrich, D-at large. "You can't fix this with a little tax increase. This is a massive, continual problem. We can't just sing Kumbaya and hope it goes away."

During the past decade, health and retirement benefits increased more than 120 percent, while employee salaries grew 50 percent, the report found.

Average cost per Montgomery employee

	Fiscal 2002	Fiscal 2011	Increase
Employer			
Montgomery County Government	\$67,000	\$106,600	59%
Montgomery County Public Schools	\$63,400	\$96,500	52%
Montgomery College	\$60,300	\$86,600	44%
Maryland National-Capital Park and Planning Commission	\$51,300	\$86,900	69%

For a typical firefighter, benefits made up 38 percent of compensation a decade ago. Today, they constitute 60 percent of earnings.

Still, some say the soaring salaries and ballooning benefits reflect the high level of service that county residents grew to expect during the mostly fortuitous decade preceding the recent financial collapse.

"There was an assumption of rising revenue every year, so long-term agreements were reached that we can no longer afford," said Councilman George Leventhal, D-at large. "That's not necessarily anyone's fault."

Schools will devote \$420 million to benefits this fiscal year, compared with \$183 million a decade ago. And benefits for general government employees will cost taxpayers \$268 million this fiscal year versus \$119 million 10 years ago.

However, county officials acknowledge that without some combination of a reduced work force or scaled-back salaries and benefits, shortfalls will continue to plague the suburb. And most tell The Washington Examiner that reducing health care benefits is a more realistic option than slashing salaries.

At this pace, OLO officials estimate one-third of the county's budget will be devoted to legally required spending such as health insurance, pension benefits and debt service within the next five fiscal years.

"The magnitude and recurring nature of these costs means that one-time solutions are insufficient to resolve the problem," the report says.

The grim findings are set against the backdrop of ongoing negotiations between top brass in County Executive Ike Leggett's administration and labor unions.

County Council members repeatedly pointed to the public school system, which accounts for 57 percent of spending and two-thirds of the work force, for savings.

Some on the school board, however, refused to commit to reduced compensation.

"It's sobering news," said School Board Vice President Chris Barclay. "But I don't think there is an answer yet. Whatever we do, I know it can't be done in chunks but has to be done all at once."